

28th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – B (October 10, 2021)

It was good to have Archbishop Jackels with us at Lourdes yesterday for the sacrament of confirmation. I'm always reminded on such occasions of my own confirmation when I was about eleven years old—the typical age for that sacrament at that time. I remember being told that we would be renewing our baptismal promises, and I got scared: “oh, no—I don't know what those are!” Fortunately, it was simply responding “I do” to the questions about believing in God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, and I made it through just fine.

Confirmation is the sacrament by which we are sealed or ‘confirmed’ with the Holy Spirit’s gifts to equip and strengthen us for active participation in the prayer and life of the Church. One of those gifts of the Spirit, and typically the first of the seven on the list, is wisdom. Today’s first reading is from the Old Testament book of that name: “I prayed...I pleaded and the spirit of wisdom came to me”. The author goes on to express joy at having this most important, most valuable gift of all—better and more precious than gold or silver or priceless gems or other riches, even more valuable than health.

So what is this ‘wisdom’ our author writes about, this first gift of the Holy Spirit? For one thing, it is not simply knowing lots of information or getting good grades in school. That’s not to say that such information or knowledge is not important—it most certainly is. That is why we have our schools; it’s why we are always in the learning mode. In fact, knowledge in the religious or spiritual sense is another one of those seven gifts of the Holy Spirit: that gift that empowers us to know about Jesus and about the basics of our Catholic faith.

Still, wisdom does come even before that vitally important knowledge of the content of our faith. Wisdom helps us realize that God is the supreme, most important good and truth of all; thus, our life in God and fostering and nurturing that life is the supreme and most important purpose and goal in life. That is what that first reading is saying about wisdom: nothing is more important, nothing is more consequential for us than having God as the center and foundation of our lives.

I recently read a really interesting book about the power of the Holy Spirit’s gift of wisdom in the lives of a French couple, Felix and Elisabeth Leseur. Both came from well-to-do families and were raised in close, loving Catholic homes; they married in 1889. Elisabeth had continued the practice of her Catholic faith into their marriage, but Felix had not. He had absorbed the anti-clerical and atheistic atmosphere that was prominent in France at that time. In fact, he did his best to lead his wife away from her faith and actually succeeded in doing so for a short time. But she gradually saw the weakness of the arguments against God and faith and ultimately returned to her life of faith and prayer in a much deeper way. We could truly say that the Holy Spirit’s gift of wisdom was renewed within her in a powerful way.

Fast forward now to the last few years of her life when she was battling cancer. Their marriage remained strong and mutually loving, but Elisabeth prayed daily for her still non-believing husband and for his return to God, faith, and Church. After her death in 1914 at the age of 47, Felix discovered her journals and other spiritual writings in which Elisabeth had written of her deep love for him, her prayer life, and how she offered prayers and her sufferings for the sake of

his conversion. Perhaps most startling of all: Elisabeth wrote of her strong belief that, after her death, Felix would not only return to his faith, but would actually become a priest as well.

We can't even imagine how completely astonished Felix was in reading these words from his wife who he loved deeply but who he thought was only wasting her time on thoughts of God and prayer and faith. Remember: he was a firmly committed atheist who thought that faith and Church, especially the Catholic Church, were nothing but empty frauds. And now he learns that his wife believed that this nonbeliever husband of hers would return to Christ...and become a priest? It seemed utterly insane, to say the least.

Well...do I really have to tell you what happened? Of course, Felix came back to God and to Jesus and to his Catholic faith with renewed love and zeal, and of course he was ordained to the priesthood in 1923 in the Dominican order. And for the rest of his life he dedicated himself to speaking to others about his dear wife's spiritual life and unconditional love for God and for himself, and to publishing her spiritual writings.

In the gospel we heard about the rich young man who sincerely wanted to know what to do to inherit eternal life. But when Jesus lovingly challenged him to sell all he had, give it to the poor and follow him, the man went away sad because he was too attached to his possessions. Felix Leseur, the rich older man, ended up walking away from his comfortable, well-to-do life and all his many treasured possessions—he did so in order to follow Jesus with his whole heart, mind and soul. The combination of Elisabeth's love, prayers and sufferings offered to God for Felix's conversion, and the Holy Spirit's gift of wisdom, enabled him to put himself entirely into God's hands for God's own purposes. And Felix did so until his death in 1950 at the age of 88.

Never, ever doubt the power of the Holy Spirit and his gifts, especially the gift of wisdom, to accomplish miracles of grace, healing and conversion. And never, ever doubt the power of our prayer and suffering and love offered up to God who can and does use those offerings to accomplish works of such amazing grace and power both for ourselves and for those we love. Both Felix and Elisabeth Leseur were open to that grace and that gift of wisdom, even though at different times in their lives...and all according to the infinitely wise plan of God. Yesterday the young people of Holy Rosary Cluster received that gift of wisdom and the Spirit's other gifts in confirmation—as we did when we were each confirmed. May the Holy Spirit continue to deepen and strengthen those gifts within us and our loved ones so that we can also be instruments of his infinitely wise plan and most amazing love.